

Internet can be a tool to address community needs, Jimmy Wales says in Muscat speech

Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales emphasised on the potential of individuals to engage as a community and harness tools like the Internet to help address needs, in a speech delivered at Sultan Qaboos University on Wednesday.

He was speaking as part of the ceremonies for the Sultan Qaboos Award for Excellence in eGovernment, which awards public and private sector organisations for their use of technology in providing services.

He said Wikipedia's philosophy is in empowering individuals and giving them access to knowledge they can use for the betterment of mankind.

"Wikipedia shows one path forward...having a system in which people come together and collaborate in a spirit of openness and kindness and thoughtfulness," he said. "This gives us a really strong need to have a sense of responsibility in our community."

Contrary to popular belief that random people edit Wikipedia entries, Wales said that the organisation relies on around 8,000 volunteers, of whom 3,000-5,000 act as a 'core community' that monitors the site.

"These are the people who are really building Wikipedia," he said.

He distinguished Wikipedia from social media such as Twitter, which he considers to be emotional, reactionary, and ineffective in creating change.

"Things like Twitter can be as much of a mob mentality as anything else. It's not a place for thought and reflection. It's a place for quick reaction with short pieces of information.

"If we're really looking for the opportunities for humankind on this planet, it has to be about thinking really hard and using reason to come to solutions to our problems," he said.

"And that involves a lot more than the very simple acts of social media."

On the other hand, he admitted Wikipedia should not be used as citation in academic writing. However, he felt this wasn't due to lack of credibility as an open-source software, but because encyclopedias in general are not substantive enough to be used as a real source.

He said that for people to generate ideas, they should focus on identifying specific needs in society to address and creating a unique solution, rather than on conceptualising something new that doesn't serve a purpose.

"When we think about designing new projects and designing new things with the Internet, let's start with what people want to accomplish and how can you help them."

He said this mentality extended to entrepreneurship, which Oman is attempting to cultivate.

"To be successful as an entrepreneur, it's about just getting started...it doesn't have to be the perfect idea," he said. "Look at some small need that's not being met and begin there, and who knows, maybe it will develop into a really big

idea.”

He said the best an entrepreneur can do for himself is to experiment, take risks, and be willing to fail. He believes an entrepreneur is built over time, and not with one idea or project.

"If you want to become an entrepreneur, seek experiences that will help you become an entrepreneur," he said. "It's about keeping an active mind and continuing to grow as you develop.